FEAR AND GREAT JOY
March 23, 2008
Easter Sunday

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 98
Isaiah 25:6–10
Matthew 27:62–28:10

"Pilate said . . . , 'Make it as secure as you can.'
So they went with the guard
and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone."
Matthew 27:65–66 (NRSV)

The proclamation of Easter Day is that all is well. And as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well but as one how has faced the Cross in all its obscenity as well as in all its glory, who has known one way or another what it is like to live separated from God. In the end, God's will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him, in him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction than the wildest visionary ever dared to dream. Christ our Lord has risen.

Frederick Buechner
"The End Is Life"
The Magnificent Defeat

Just as his friends did not expect his resurrection, O God,
so we, his twenty-first-century friends, crowd into churches
on this Easter morning not sure what to expect.
Death is so final, so blunt, so deadly.
Startle us again with the unlikely, beautiful proclamation
that death itself has been dealt a mortal blow,
that love, not death, reigns. Break through the aridness of our disbelief
with the bright light of your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I suspect by now you know that by being here this morning you are doing something you never did before and will never, ever, be able to do again. Easter will not come this early again for 220 years. For that matter, unless you're over 95, you've never celebrated Easter this early. The last time

Easter came this early was 1913, which was just five years after the Cubs won the World Series, which, around here, is a metaphor for a very long time ago.

When it comes this early, it wreaks havoc on the entire commercial attempt to turn Easter into a spring fertility festival with all those delightful eggs and baby chicks and bunnies and frolicking lambs. On the other hand, Chicago weather on a March morning can be like a slap in the face that clarifies the mind and helps us remember that on the agenda today are not eggs and bunnies but fear and death and a cold wind off the lake. It could be worse. Easter can come one day earlier. The date is calculated in a way similar to the Jewish Passover—the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox, a formula that simply refuses to stick in the mind. So it could be worse—and will be, in 2285, 277 years from now.

A few years ago an Easter-week edition of *Newsweek* reported that 87 percent of the American people said they believed Jesus had risen from the dead. And preachers and church ushers across the land know that all 87 percent are coming to church this morning and trying to find a seat. It is customary, of course, for the preacher to scold a bit and remind everyone that we do this every week or, more rudely, to wish everyone a Merry Christmas in case you're not coming back until next Easter. Not this preacher. This is the day to be here. Who wouldn't get up early and stand in line on a cold Chicago morning to hear the most extraordinary thing: death is not what we thought it was? Death is in some way dead. Who wouldn't want to hear that?

We think we know all there is to know about death. Barbara Brown Taylor says you go to the funeral home, view the body, go home and eat fried chicken and green bean casserole with your neighbors, and get on with your life (*Journal for Preachers,* Easter 2008). Will Willimon says we live in a world that thinks death has the last word, a world in which we can be convinced easily that the way to deal with death is more death: lose 3,000 civilians in a terrorist attack—invade a country that had nothing to do with it, kill tens of thousands. Deal with death with more death (*Thank God It's Friday*).

That's how the story begins—with people like you and me who thought they knew all there was to know about death.

Their friend died on Friday afternoon. They had followed him as he taught in Galilee, 110 miles to the north. They walked behind him and watched in amazement as large crowds of people began to show up wherever he was. They watched in amazement as he did what nobody is supposed to do—touched lepers, ate with sinners, welcomed the unclean, talked to women, held children in his lap, restored sight, healed the sick.

They followed all the way down to Jerusalem for the Passover and watched in amazement—and a little fear—as crowds cheered and welcomed him and waved palm branches and called him king, Messiah, Lord. They were with him that amazing week as he taught in the temple, and they saw the opposition to him harden and strategize. They reclined at the supper table on Thursday evening when he broke bread and said, “This is my body broken for you,” and shared a cup of wine and said, “This is my blood.”

They watched in fear as an angry mob surrounded them that night, arrested him and led him away to trial for blasphemy and sedition. They did what any sane person would do: they ran away, fled in terror, abandoned him to his fate—all but a few women who continued that long night to stay with him. Maybe they were on the edge of the crowd watching on Friday morning when he appeared before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and maybe they heard the crowd turn on him and demand his execution. Maybe they watched from afar as he was stretched out and nailed to a cross and hung up to die.

The women were there, still there, the only ones not to flee in terror, that Friday afternoon as the life drained out of him and he said, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” The rest—Peter, James, John, and the others were hiding—while the women watched a good man, Joseph, claim the body and watched, through their tears, as Joseph put the body in a tomb and rolled a stone across the opening. Then it was dark, and they joined the others, hiding, behind a locked door in a room on a back street of Jerusalem.

Saturday morning, the sabbath day. Quiet Saturday, nothing happening, nothing moving, no one working, shops closed. A delegation of old men comes to the royal palace where the governor is staying. They were there yesterday in fact. Now they’re back. They are the same religious and political leaders who convinced Pontius Pilate that it was in his best interest, the interests of the empire, that Jesus of Nazareth be put to death. Pilate finally agreed, but without much enthusiasm for the project. He seems to have known that Jesus was innocent of the charges and, as he condemned him to die, washed his hands of the whole business.

That was yesterday. His soldiers had carried out the grisly business and reported that the prisoner was dead and buried; they had completed their assignment before the sun went down on Friday and the sabbath began.

But now they’re back, the same old men who wanted him dead. “Excellency, his disciples are still at large. . . . They could steal the body and claim he rose from the dead and then you’d have a real problem on your hands. Assign a cohort of soldiers to stand guard at the tomb.” Imagine Pilate’s

irritation and impatience. Would this matter never end? “You have a guard assigned to the temple. Use them,” he snapped. “Make it as secure as you can.” Frederick Buechner describes that very moment:

> The venerable old men turning toward each other, their faded old eyes wide with bewilderment, their mouths hanging loose—the kind of dazed, tremulous fear of old men suddenly called upon to do a young man’s job. You are not sure whether to laugh or to cry. “As secure as you can,” Pilate said. But how secure is that? Their lips move, but no sound comes. God knows they have good reason to be afraid. (“The End Is Life,” *The Magnificent Defeat*, pp. 75–76)

They’re afraid, Buechner says, that someone might steal the body and pull off a religious hoax, but what they’re really afraid of is that what he promised would happen, would happen: that somehow on the third day he’d stand up and walk out of that tomb. Although they probably never mentioned it to one another, that was their real fear, those old men who thought they knew everything there was to know about death, the power of death, the reality of death, the finality of death, the inevitability of death, the threat of death—so valuable as an instrument of control. But what if death were dead? What then?

So they went to the tomb with a few soldiers, and they secured the tomb by sealing the stone, and then the soldiers sat down and took turns standing guard. Old men, Buechner says, trying to do something as impossible as preventing the sun from rising.

The sabbath ends at sundown Saturday. His followers are still hiding in that room. On Sunday morning, the first day of a new week, when life resumes and everyone goes back to work, two women—Mary Magdalene and another Mary—are up at dawn and head for the tomb. These women are fearless. They don’t seem to know the meaning of danger.

The biblical account is spare, lean: there is an earthquake and an angel, the guards faint in fear, the stone rolls back, the angel says, “Do not be afraid. . . . He is not here. Go tell his disciples.” So they start to run, their hearts in their throats, and suddenly there is Jesus, standing there. “Greetings,” he says. “Don’t be afraid. Go tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee.”

What we must not do on this day is the very thing we American Presbyterians want most to do, namely come up with a rational explanation. After all, things like this just don’t happen. So maybe it was his teachings that live on. Maybe his spirit lives among us, like Shakespeare’s or Beethoven’s. Maybe he lives in the flowers of spring. There is no better way to deflect or diffuse Easter than that. So we will not do it this morning. The

resurrection will not submit to rational analysis. Rather it is the event that most suggests that there is truth that transcends logic. There is a God who exists beyond our ability to understand.

In the meantime there are two fears now: the fear of death, as old as the human race, and the fear of life lived in light of a resurrection, which was the fear of those old men trying to secure the tomb—secure themselves from resurrection, that is.

More than Jesus died on Friday afternoon. So did his followers' hope that in him something new and beautiful and hopeful actually had come on earth. Hearing him teach, watching him with the sick and the children, watching him gently restore calmness to a man in the throes of psychosis, watching him lovingly understand and console a desperate father, you could almost imagine a world like that: a world where goodness and kindness and gentleness prevail, not meanness and cruelty and violence. You could almost imagine a world where God wipes the tears from all eyes, a world where people of different races, ethnicities, and religions sit down together at a banquet table. You could almost imagine a world where children are fed and all the sick cared for, a world where there are no concealed firearms and innocent children are not gunned down in the streets and sidewalks, where the elderly are secure, and where precious resources are joyfully invested in life, not weapons systems (David Davis, *A Gospel You Can Taste*).

That's what died on Friday. That is what the women were grieving in the early light of dawn. Their dear friend was dead and so, apparently, was the dream, the hope.

But now, if he's alive, so is the dream. Now if he is alive, so is the hope. Now if he is alive, so are they, and there is work to do. "Go," he says, "tell my brothers." "Go, there is work to do." The kingdom is still here. It is where you are. It is wherever you live in my name; wherever you do, in my name, what I did—heal the sick, free the oppressed, welcome the outcasts. The kingdom, my kingdom, is wherever people invest in peace instead of war; wherever people, in my name, reach across the barriers that divide my family—barriers of race, for instance, and gender, and sexual orientation, and economic class, and religion. "Go," he says. "It's your job now, and I promise to go with you and be with you."

A scholarly way to say it sounds like this: "The resurrection of Jesus is an eschatological event that makes possible a radical style of new life" (*Texts for Preaching*).

Jesus said simply, "Go." The risen Christ said, "Go to Galilee." Go, that is, to where you live your life, where you raise your children and earn your living,

where you live in your community and pay your taxes and cast your ballots. The hope did not die. The kingdom comes wherever you are—in my name.

“Go tell my brothers,” he says. Why them? You’d think he’d have had enough of them. They had betrayed, denied, disappointed, and abandoned him. You’d think he’d get some new disciples this time.

Writing in the *Christian Century*, Frederick Niedner, Professor of Theology at Valparaiso University, observes, “My brothers! After all that had transpired, we are still family. He hadn’t come back to get revenge or condemn anyone. No, he returned to gather his family” (11 March 2008).

And so finally Easter is personal and comes to each of us. He gathers us today, his family. Finally Easter comes to that place in our hearts where we keep our dearest loves and most precious hopes and most profound fears; that place in each of us where we find ourselves grieving our losses, even before they happen. And to each of us, he comes, a risen Lord who walked into the valley of the shadow of death before us and, because of that, promises that we will never be alone, not even there.

It’s personal, finally. One of the members of this church, an officer, wrote a daily devotion that went out last month near the beginning of Lent. She was thinking about the words of Jesus “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” She observed that mostly we hear those words in a public setting, in a church service, for instance. But Jesus said those words first to a dear friend, to Martha, whose brother had just died. “Jesus speaks personally, intimately, to a person he loves” (Carol Lobbes).

Jack Stotts, former President of McCormick Theological Seminary and Austin Seminary, Interim Pastor here in 1984 and Theologian in Residence in 1996, died last month. He was a distinguished Presbyterian, and our denomination called on him to chair and lead a committee to write a brief statement of our faith.

I will always associate the words of that statement with Jack, words that became even more meaningful, powerful since his death.

The first words: “In life and in death we belong to God,” and then these:

“Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.”

That is the good news of Easter. Death has been overcome. Jesus Christ walked into the valley of the shadow of death and did not stay there.

And so there is nothing to fear. You and I are free from all that, free from fear and dread and deadly anxiety.

Free to live now with a sense of glorious abandon. Free to love our dear ones and this beautiful world. Free to give ourselves gladly to the dream and hope and work of God’s kingdom. Free to live every day of these lives of ours, right up to the last one, in gratitude and joy and hope.

Christ our Lord is risen.